

One against All?

Macron's deeply unpopular pension reform seems set to pass, but the fight isn't over yet

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A demonstrator in Paris protests against Emmanuel Macron's use of Article 49-3 to pass the pension reform

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The last few weeks have seen over 1 million French citizens take to the streets against the government's planned pension reform. Most of the political parties and France's trade union movement, not to mention over 90 percent of the active population, stand opposed to the reform, but French president Emmanuel Macron continues to press on with it. How did we get here, and what comes next?

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In late 2019, after a trying year of popular mobilization from the so-called gilet jaunes, the "Yellow Vests" movement, Macron's government announced a plan to fundamentally reform France's pension system. His goal was to move towards a point-based, pay-as-you-go scheme instead of the current universal repartition system, while extending the duration of working life and harmonizing the various pension schemes downwards.

The reform was met with widespread opposition and provoked the emergence of a united front of trade unions as well as the resurgence of the Yellow Vests. Ultimately, the project was shelved in March 2020 after three months of massive mobilization, with Macron citing the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse. Three years later, after narrowly winning re-election against Marine Le Pen, Macron's will to reform the pension system is still intact, although his support in parliament is now weaker than before, as his coalition does not hold an absolute majority. This desperate bid is taking place in the larger context of unrelenting attacks against the French people's right to retire, with an average of one attempt at reforming the system every four years over the last three decades.

A Dubious Reform

The current project includes two significant parameters: raising the legal retirement age from 62 to 64, and accelerating the rise in the years of contributions required to claim a full pension (43 instead of 42). From the start, the government presented the reform as a necessity and a matter of justice between workers, deploying multiple arguments that were soon refuted in the public arena.

The first and major argument was that of the deficit in the French retirement system, estimated at 13 billion euro. Yet, according to the Retirement Orientation Council, the Prime Minister's prospective service dealing with the issue, this deficit does not pose a threat, as most of its scenarios predict a return to balance without the need for a reform.

It's worth noting that the government allocated 300 billion euro to support the economy during the pandemic, while the 13-billion deficit is relatively inconsequential when compared to the pension system's total budget, estimated at 346 billion euro for 2021.

The need to reduce the deficit thus conceals another motivation, on which Emmanuel Macron relied in the second phase: to appease financial markets and creditors of public debt by signalling an austerity agenda. For, even if we accept that the reform is necessary on principle, no other avenue to increase funding was explored. The government refuses to make use of the wealthiest by reducing the highest pensions (1.7 percent of pensioners receive more than 4,500 euro per month), just as it refuses to increase contributions for high earners (as recently proposed by the Spanish government), or to tax the richest to fill the deficit.

If therefore became quite clear that the real aim is not to fill the deficit of the pension system, but to finance future corporate tax cuts.

Fairness for Whom?

Macron's government also attempted to present the reform as reducing inequalities between workers, particularly to the advantage of women workers and those who entered the workforce at an early age.

In fact, an impact study on the project reveals that many women will be more affected by the reform than men of the same age. For the 1972 generation, women will have to work an average of nine more months, compared to five for men. For the 1980 generation, women will have to work twice as many months as men. The acceleration of the increase in the required years of contributions will also disproportionately affect part-time workers and those with fragmented careers including periods of unemployment or parental leave, which are mostly women.

The project will also exacerbate class inequalities, particularly to the detriment of manual workers with lower incomes and education levels. The reform will have a greater impact on those who entered the workforce early, compared to high-income earners with extensive education. As it stands, individuals born after 1972 who have studied and started working at the age of 22 must work until the age of 65 to receive a full pension, and therefore will not be affected by the increase in the legal retirement age.

The government also promises that the reform will establish a minimum guaranteed gross pension of 1,200 euro after a full working life. However, eligibility for this increase requires working full-time at minimum wage throughout one's working life. As economist Michaël Zemmour points out, this only affects a small number of people.

Currently, 5 million retirees receive a monthly pension of less than 1,200 euro. Should the reform pass, only those already earning more than 1,100 euro will surpass the 1,200 threshold, and roughly 25 percent of retirees (and 40 percent of women) will still receive a pension of less than 1,200 euro because many have interrupted working lives.

Uniting the Opposition

Popular opposition to the reform has remained consistently high since it was introduced by Prime Minister Élisabeth Borne on 12 January, fluctuating between 68 percent and 72 percent of the population.

The *Quantité Critique* research collective, to which we belong, conducted a survey in February with a representative national sample of 4,000 respondents reflecting the varied work experiences of the population. The results reveal broad opposition to the pension reform among the working population and provide a more detailed breakdown of various attitudes towards the current social movement.

We found that opposition to the reform is widespread across all categories of workers, with a particularly notable presence among technicians, manual labourers, and blue-collar workers. However, even among higher managerial workers, 64 percent express opposition.

The only groups not overwhelmingly opposed are those over the age of 65 (with 43 percent in favour of the reform and 45 percent against) and those with a net monthly income of more than 4,000 euro (with 52 percent in favour and 42 percent against). However, even in these groups, there is reluctance to support the reform.

This overwhelming rejection highlights a long-standing and widely experienced issue: the deterioration of employment terms and working conditions, a trend that cuts across various economic sectors, job types, and contractual arrangements.

Our study shows that workers who hold the most demanding jobs and have the most vulnerable employment statuses are at the forefront of opposition to the reform, although it is also prevalent among highly skilled workers. This implies that those on the fringes of the workforce with the toughest jobs are the most opposed to the reform. Opposition rises as high as 83 percent among workers who, when asked to describe their work experience using a selection of provided words, chose four negative adjectives ("stressful", "dangerous", "repetitive", "exhausting").

Even among workers who have a positive outlook on their jobs and are not concerned about job or income loss, the overwhelming majority (64 percent) still oppose the pension reform. This highlights the exceptional uniformity of the opposition, which cuts across all categories of workers and is not limited to traditional areas of protest. The widespread rejection of the reform is rooted in a vision of retirement as a time for relaxation (92 percent of respondents) and pursuing new interests (90 percent of respondents), indicating a rethinking of the place given to work in life and a desire for independence from the productive market sphere.

Mass Mobilization

This opposition has resulted in a powerful social movement driven by a united front of the trade unions, a rare occurrence in French politics known as the *inter-syndicale* uniting the movement's Communist and social-democratic wings.

The movement began on 19 January with calls for strikes and protests. The momentum of the demonstrations has remained high since then, with tremendous levels of participation. Protesters broke national records on 31 January, when 1.27 million people all over France according to police, although that mark was quickly surpassed on 7 March when 1.28 million took to the streets.

Ongoing strikes in the private and public sectors have been gaining momentum, especially since February. The chosen strategy has been to have massive strikes on national days of mobilization, with added staggered strikes becoming more frequent since mid-February. Public transportation, the railway sector, and the national education system have been particularly affected, and continue to see strong mobilizations with frequent service disruptions.

Although the strikes have not reached the levels seen in the movement against the last pension reform in the 1990s, there is a significant disparity in terms of the sectors and wage levels involved. This lower level of activity can be attributed to, in part, the neoliberal transformation of work in France, which has led to atomization and a decline in the number of professional organizations.

So-called "strategic sectors" have also joined the movement. On 10 March, six out of seven oil refineries in mainland France were blocked. On 18 March, 37 percent of operational staff were still on strike at TotalEnergies.

Throughout March, workers in the energy sector have organized strikes in nuclear power plants and deliberate power outages in various centres of institutional power, even hitting construction sites for the 2024 Paris Olympics. Parisian waste collectors and waste management facilities also joined the movement, leading to the rapid accumulation of garbage in the capital. Other major cities such

as Nantes, Le Havre, Marseille, and Metz have also been impacted.

As parliament edges closer to adopting the reform, hopes remain high and the social movement's legitimacy in the court of public opinion remains indisputable, especially since the government has failed to secure democratic support, whether from public opinion or the representative institutions that are supposed to pass it into law.

Circumventing Democracy

Facing staunch and broad opposition, all efforts were exhausted to speed up passing the reform into law. To this end, not a single authoritarian tool in the French Constitution was spared.

The legislative process began on 30 January in committees at the National Assembly. The government chose to use Article 47.1 of the Constitution to change the reform's legal status into a supplementary budget bill, which limits the duration of debates in the National Assembly to 50 days and significantly reduces the opposition's ability to obstruct the project.

Debates began on 6 February in plenary session and were marked by significant tensions and several controversies. The left-wing alliance NUPES was torn between two options. On the one hand, the perspective to submit a massive number of amendments would slow down the legislative process and give trade unions time to build momentum in the streets, but also carried the risk that most articles in the bill would not be voted on. On the other hand, allowing the process to advance by limiting amendments would force the right-wing Republicans to stand by their support for the reform in votes.

Divided on the issue, with La France insoumise pushing for a strategy of obstruction, and the Communists, Socialists, and Greens preferring to withdraw amendments, NUPES opted for the second option on 15 February and withdrew 90 percent of its amendments to provoke a vote on Article 7. The manoeuvre failed, however, as the debates ended in confusion on two days later without a vote in the National Assembly.

Next came the right wing-controlled Senate's turn to examine the law, starting on 28 February in committees and 2 March in a plenary session. The left-wing groups followed the strategy adopted by NUPES in the National Assembly and submitted few amendments to allow votes on articles of the bill. Six days later, on 8 March, the majority of the Republicans' group used Article 38 of the Senate's rules of procedure to force debates to be considerably accelerated. The following day, Article 7 was adopted with 201 votes in favour and 115 against.

Two days later, Minister of Labour Olivier Dussopt used Article 44 of the Constitution to impose one singular vote on the whole text. The next night, the law was adopted in its entirety by the Senate.

Macron's Coup de Force

The process then picked up considerable speed. As the National Assembly and the Senate disagreed, a joint committee composed of seven deputies and seven senators met on 15 March to establish a common text for both chambers, which was then required to be voted on by each of the two. The Senate adopted it on 16 March, but no majority was reached in the National Assembly despite negotiations between the government and the right wing.

At this point, Prime Minister Élisabeth Borne decided to use Article 49.3 of the Constitution, enabling the government to force the adoption of a law without a vote in the National Assembly. The same evening, spontaneous demonstrations took place throughout France to oppose what the trade unions and its allies describe as a denial of democracy.

The only way to counteract this move would have been a vote of no confidence, which, should it succeed, compels the government to resign. A cross-party motion of to that effect was submitted by the centrist LIOT group, but failed by a mere nine votes. The same evening, spontaneous demonstrations broke out throughout France to oppose what the trade union front and its allies describe as a denial of democracy.

NUPES is now exploring the possibility of using the "shared initiative referendum". On 17 March, the left-wing coalition submitted a bill that would forbid raising the retirement age beyond 62. Should the Constitutional Council approve the proposal, it could pave the way for a referendum on the issue. However, the Council has one month to review the text, and the proposal will become invalid if the reform is passed before this deadline, as the French Constitution does not permit the annulment of laws passed within a year.

Macron's ability to remain in power by a narrow margin of only nine votes in the National Assembly can be seen as a somewhat subdued victory. Moreover, the invocation of Article 49.3 is a clear indication of the government's weakness. This situation further exacerbates the ongoing political crisis in France, with the government increasingly isolated, while social unrest continues to intensify. Given these circumstances, all the necessary elements seem to be in place for the social movement to persist and grow stronger in the coming days, aiming to force a withdrawal of the law, similar to the dynamic that developed around the government's attempt to introduce "first employment contracts" back in 2006.

Quelle: <https://www.rosalux.eu/en/article/2223.one-against-all.html>